

Aisha Sultanand & Adam Sichko, the St. Louis Post Dispatch

Some frustrated and anxious travelers got a reprieve Friday from a new passport requirement that has caused massive backlogs and delays in processing applications.

Passengers flying to Mexico, Canada, the Caribbean or Bermuda, who have already applied for a passport but have not received it in time, can travel until the end of September with a State Department "proof of application" and a government-issued identification, such as a drivers license.

But even that State Department receipt, which serves as proof of application, may not arrive in time for those with immediate plans, the department said.

And the waiver also does not help those waiting for passports to travel to Europe or elsewhere this summer — leaving brides with destination weddings, students on class trips and families with long-standing reunions at the mercy of overwhelmed passport offices. Advertisement

A passport application surge has resulted from the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative that since January has required U.S. citizens to use passports when entering the U.S. from Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean by air. It is part of a broader package of immigration rules enacted after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Last year, the State Department processed 12.1 million passports. This year, officials expect to process about 18 million, said Maura Harty, the assistant secretary for consular affairs.

Turnaround times for passports were bumped up from six weeks to 10-12 weeks after the surge, Harty said. But 500,000 applications have already taken longer, she said.

Worried travelers

Lauren Plummer of St. Louis is frantic to help her 13-year-old daughter make a class trip to France leaving in nine days. They applied for her passport early in March and were assured they had plenty of time, but the passport still hasn't arrived. They have already paid more than \$2,300 for the trip, which is nonrefundable so close to the departure date.

The most frustrating part has been trying to get a real person on the phone at the passport call center, Plummer said. [RELATED LINK](#)
Passport regulations

Marilyn Dengenhardt of Jefferson City has already faced the worst-case scenario — and lost. Her daughter's passport arrived a day after the graduating senior class trip left for Italy. The Dengenhardts had applied for the passport in February.

They later pleaded with the travel agency to change their daughter's flight. It refused unless the family paid an extra \$1,100, Dengenhardt said. The cost of the trip was nearly \$3,500, and the family is trying to get a refund.

"It's been a sad, sad week," she said. "(My daughter) had looked forward to this since last fall."

Amy Drezek, 28, of south St. Louis County, understands that desperation. She was preparing to leave last week to get married in Jamaica, along with nearly 50 people in the wedding party. Drezek sent passport applications for herself and her two children early in March. As the date got closer, she set her alarm to call the passport agency daily as soon as it opened at 5 a.m.

She called Sen. Claire McCaskill's office daily for help.

"I was having a nervous breakdown," she said. Two days before she was supposed to fly out, Drezek, her fiancé and her two children drove in the middle of the night to Chicago, the nearest

passport office. They arrived two hours before the office opened and waited nearly 10 hours in lines to get their passports. "If they were going to change these laws, they should have been more prepared," said Drezek, now married and back home from Jamaica.

State department was unprepared

In a briefing Friday morning, Harty acknowledged that the State Department did not expect the flood of applications.

"What we did not anticipate adequately enough was the American citizens' willingness and desire to comply with the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative in the time frame that they did," Harty said. She said the department had hired 145 people last month to work on the backlog and would hire 400 more people this quarter.

The agency expects to eliminate the backlog and meet the new standard of 10-12 weeks before the end of September, she said.

Members of Congress help

On Thursday, Rep. Todd Akin, R-Town and Country, lobbied the top U.S. passport official to temporarily lift the requirement for traveling to America's northern and southern neighbors. McCaskill, D-Mo, met with State Department officials about the issue last week.

In a letter Friday to Ann Barrett, managing director for the Office of Passport Services at the State Department, Akin noted that his office had taken an average of 20 to 25 new passport cases a day, with four or five staffers working "almost full time" to handle all the issues.

Others in the bistate congressional delegation reported similar experiences. The district office of Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, reported about 15-20 phone calls a day for the past six weeks; a spokesman noted that the call volume was "markedly down" on Friday.

The district office of Rep. John Shimkus, R-Collinsville, fielded more than 100 phone calls in each of the last two weeks and probably handled close to 1,000 calls in all, a spokesman said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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